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PANDEMIC POEMS AS CONTEMPLATIVE DISCOURSE IN RECENT NIGERIAN
POETRY

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Abstract

Recent Nigerian poems, especially those written to convey the social response to the Covid-19 pandemic, exhibit the basic quality of contemplative discourse. The poems display the penetrating thoughts of the poets on the lessons which humanity has learned from the scourge of the pandemic. This essay explores pandemic poems as contemplative discourse in the work of five Nigerian poets: Ariyo Ahmad, Ayodele Kuburat Olaosebikan, Chidiere Enyia, Azih Paul Tochukwu and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. The study focuses on the themes pervading their work in the anthology *World on the Brinks*: to interpret the poems while also adopting Bakhtin's dialogic theory as foundation for evaluating the content of the poems. The essay identifies three main themes which cover the major socio-political and economic behaviour of Nigerians, and exposes the various strategies put in place to fight the impact of the pandemic and win it. The essay concludes that the poets contemplate themes of human frailty and mortality, the power of love and the global family of humanity, as well as human resilience, thus affirming that Nigerian pandemic poems exhibit the nature of contemplative discourse.

Keywords: Contemplative discourse, pandemic frailty, mortality, resilience, Covid-19

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has opened a new vista for Nigerian poetry, as it offers the poets new material for contemplation. Literature, by its conception, is the product of reflection. Essentially, all literary works aspire to the condition of meditation. This explains why literature engages in philosophical inquiry in order to unravel the mystery behind the human predicament. Contemplation, although the forte of philosophy and religion, is still, however, embraced by literary philosophers, especially poets. The term, poetic contemplation, presupposes the sum of ideas which engage the attention and introspection of the poet. Put differently, it is the mental preoccupation of the poet as it concerns a specific subject. A major aspect of the contemplative art is the perspective or angle from which the contemplative poet views the subject.

Viewed against this background, the pandemic verses, crafted to express the concerns of the people during the pandemic, are actually composed out of a contemplative exigency. Louis Komjathy provides an etymological meaning of contemplation by writing that it comes from the Latin, *contemplation*, which means to “look at or to observe” (4). A contemplative discourse expresses the thought of a writer on a particular subject, examining it from diverse perspectives. The essential point which this essay seeks to establish is that “literary works are discourses” (Akwanya 46) because of the way the poets employ the personal pronoun “I” to convey their ideas.

This essay is anchored on Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism to interpret Nigerian pandemic experience, by paying attention to the voices emanating from the poems which help to establish the contemplative content of the poems. Panchappa R. Waghmare examines the relationship between dialogism and intertextuality. Waghmare explains that in Bakhtin’s dialogism, a “text is not a self contained organism and the language represented in text is not alien entity; instead, a site for dialogic interaction of multiple voices or modes of discourse” (1). The pivot of Bakhtin’s position is that the several voices that arise from the text function as modes of discourse. Therefore, if these voices are followed logically, one arrives at the message of the discourse.

Abbas Manouchehri and Gitti Pour Zaki embark on an analysis of dialogism in Bakhtin’s thought by demonstrating the interface between philosophy and methodology. They agree that Bakhtin shows “the relation between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ as manifested clearly in language” (6). Thus, according to them, language conveys relationship between two opposing referents in a discourse. In a contemplative discourse, focus is on how the poets convey their contemplative attitudes to the pandemic and how it has influenced human behaviour.

Pandemic poems written by recent Nigerian poets demonstrate the nature of contemplative discourse as they dwell on themes which extol human virtues. The poems of study are selected from *World on the Brinks: An Anthology of Covid-19 Pandemic* edited by Ikechukwu Otuu Egbuta and Nnenna Vivien Chukwu. The study focuses on the poems of Ariyo Ahmad, Ayodele Kuburat Olaosebikan, Chidiere Enyia, Azih Paul Tochukwu and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo. *World on the Brinks* abbreviated subsequently as (*WTB*), comprises poems by poets drawn from Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Philippines, Yemen and India. For the purpose of this study, we shall be looking at the

poems of five (5) Nigerian poets from different parts of the country. This essay demonstrates that pandemic poems are contemplative discourse in that they are products of contemplation in which the poets reflect upon the frailty of human existence and mortality, the power of love and the global family of humanity as well as human resilience.

The Frailty of Human Existence and Mortality

The contemplation of recent Nigerian pandemic poets centres round the frailty of human existence and mortality. They expose how weak, vulnerable and transient human lives can be as Covid-19 wreaks severe havoc on humanity. Reading the poems of Ariyo Ahmad, Ayodele Kuburat Olaosebikan and Chidiere Enyia, the above theme becomes more apparent. In Ahmad's "Staying Safe at Home," the poet draws attention to Covid-19 and its indiscriminate orientation:

If it had loved the poor and detested the rich
Souls that would have been banished
From the sacred sight
To the graveside
Would have numbered millions
Piling on one another like soil for making ridges. (*WTB* 40)

The first point that the poet makes above is that the virus does not discriminate between the poor and the rich. This debunks the claim in several quarters in Nigeria that the disease kills only the rich. The poet explains that if Covid-19 had decided to kill only the poor, the number of persons that would have died could have been in the range of several millions. In fact, the agricultural imagery intensifies the figures. The corpses would have been piling on one another, to the extent that they give a picture of ridges in the farm. This acute but dense picturesque poetic iconography reveals the sight of mass graves across the world, and it is a fitting image of countless numbers of people being lost to this pandemic. In a moment of introspection, one becomes aware of the vulnerability of human existence to death and of the sense of mortality.

The speaker then counters the above with an equi-balance view of the virus:

But it leaves no one, be it sounds of pocket and health
It opens its teeth to attack like a hungry spider
Putting the web of fear on every heart and mind. (40)

The Covid-19 pandemic is conceived above as an indiscriminate killer, paying no special regard to the size of one's pocket or how sound the health of an individual may be. This shows that none of the above considerations matters to the disease. The poet seems to be expressing the view that it is important that one avoids things that may predispose one to the disease. As long as one is human, one is susceptible to the virus. The poet employs personification to emphasise the ferocity and the lethal quality of the virus, as it possesses teeth with which to devour humanity. It is in this sense that the growing fear of the virus begins to increase. The poet, by painting the severe nature of the virus, summons the readers to also contemplate their frailty and mortality.

The poems of Olaosebikan address the frailty of human existence and the sense of mortality. This view is ardently expressed in the poem entitled "This Too Shall Pass", a highly philosophical piece of writing which echoes the Christian sensibility and faith in the power of time. Still depending on Christian images, the speaker declares:

Behold! It's the Reaper-
 The Grim reaper is here!
 See the sons of men scampering for safety - everyman for his life
 The raging waves and stormy seas prostrate in silence
 It is the trembling of creation;
 All welcome the fearsome general,
 The Grand Commander of the Covid-19 forces. (47)

Covid-19 is envisioned through the image of the reaper as one mandated to harvest the souls of humanity. This image reminds one of Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" in which the reaper harvests with sickle in hand. But in the above stanza, the reaper is a disease. This reaper is unrelenting in its mission to kill. The beauty of this stanza is in its evocative and appealing water images. These images of waves and seas aggregate the sense of the high and mighty in society who, without resistance, "prostrate" to the power of the virus. Thus, humanity, irrespective of class and power, is frail and mortal as all are vulnerable to death. Also, to concretise the picture of Covid-19, the poet relies on the image of a dictator or a military Grand Commander. Here again, the point being made is that Covid-19 does not yield to any medication or human intervention. In fact, it is the Commander that cannot be commanded. It commands the closure of all human and economic activities. It also compels everyone to a lockdown. This is an excellent image.

The speaker continues with military imagery thus:

What a force! Irresistible!
 Behold our man-made defences turned lifeless guns against
 Viruses, oh no!
 Shall we ever defeat this invisible warrior of the century? (47)

The mind of the poet is suffused with images of invincibility, for the Covid-19 pandemic as presented, represents a mighty power unleashed on the earth to destroy humanity. The tone of the poem reveals, at every stanza, the sense of triumph over humanity. The disease is also, in most cases, amplified to present the true picture of death happening around the world. According to the speaker, the pandemic has destroyed all "man-made defences". This point is further emphasised with a rhetorical question which functions rather as a statement than a question. It seems to posit that the disease can never be defeated.

Enyia also contemplates the frailty of human existence and mortality in the poem "Covid-19". The poet-persona, rather than speaking as the virus, addresses it instead:

COVID-19!
 You have killed hundreds
 And thousands of people
 Around the world not minding their

Age, race, religion, skin colour
Social background and nationality. (WTB, 78)

This stanza echoes the views of Ahmad and Olaosebikan who have contemplated the destructive nature of corona virus, thus exposing the frailty of human existence and human mortality. It shows that the minds of these pandemic poets converge on the same idea because they observe the same phenomenon. From their varying views, they are correct in their assessment and contemplation about life and living as well as death and mortality.

To further amplify how vulnerable human existence can be during the pandemic, the poet writes:

COVID-19!
You locked down nations
Closed down borders, crashed economy
Postponed sports, restricted movements
Created hardship, hunger, anxiety and
Economic recession. (78)

The stanza above reveals the thought of the poet. Evident from this meditation is that everything that humanity exalts appears to fail. The poem relies heavily on the image of curtailment. Human activities are said to be grounded. The nations of the world are "locked down" by the virus. The economy is not left out, as it too "crashed" leading to global economic recession and economic woes on the people. Even sports and all such social engagements are "postponed". Movements of all sort have to be "restricted". All these social curtailments have "created hardship", "hunger", "anxiety" and economic pressure. The point which Enyia seems to be making is that the pandemic has exposed the frailty of human existence and its mortality.

The Power of Love and the Global Family of Humanity

Apart from contemplating the frailty of human existence and mortality, Nigerian poets who used the pandemic as muse also address the power of love and the global family of humanity. These poets include: Ariyo Ahmad, Ayodele Kuburat Olaosebikan and Azih Paul Tochukwu. In "Benefits of Covid-19", Ahmad recounts the benefits thus:

The world was once a giant planet,
But now separated into fragments.
But the appearance of unseen virus,
Make us get closer and stronger,
Like the unseen soul and body. (WTB 42)

The first two lines belong to a different time. Precisely, they speak of the pre-Covid-19 era. The world, as presented, is a divided planet with no real sense of togetherness and love. The remaining three lines belong to the pandemic season. The poet-persona contemplates the power of love and the global family of humanity. As the Corona virus visits death on the world, the people get "closer and stronger" in a bid to fight the plague. This is the major benefit of the virus to humanity.

The speaker recalls a personal experience to contemplate the power of love and the need for humanity to see one another as one big family, caring and living in unity:

My neighbour never checked on me,
 And I never made the attempt too.
 We were only friends on air,
 Our homes never suit us for once.
 Now, the appearance of virus bonds us again. (42)

The poet addresses the negligence with which humanity treats neighbourliness. The concept of who a neighbour is appears to have eluded the world. Here, the poet indirectly calls on human beings to go beyond the perception of a neighbour as a mere friend, to one of family. In fact, the pandemic opens the eyes of the poet-persona to this new reality. The speaker understands that a neighbor, who was once considered a friend, is actually a family member to be cared for. The loss of one's neighbour affects the entire community. This is the philosophical cogitation that runs through this poem.

The theme of love and the global family of humanity resounds more in the concluding stanza:

A race of human,
 Who never checked on one another,
 Now, the appearance of the unseen virus,
 Clustered them like blood and vein,
 Maybe after this the world might be better again. (43)

The real benefit of this virus is that a world where the human race never appreciated one another, is made more forceful to the imagination when viewed against the backdrop of the pandemic. It has resulted in social cluster. The image of blood and vein helps to imprint the message. The blood flows through the vein. Therefore, they both need each other. Similarly, every human being needs the other person to survive the corona virus. This message rings loud in the poem.

Similarly, Olaosebikan in "Mother Corona" adopts the invocative tone in addressing the virus. The poet contemplates the power of love in the following lines:

Your lessons we have all etched into our hearts
 Our differences are irrelevant
 Alas! We beseech thee dear mother corona -
 This humble plea we make. (45)

The corona virus has taught humanity several lessons, but significant among them is the power of love, especially in the area of peaceful co-existence, caregiving and benevolence. The poet calls on humanity to put their differences aside, because they are now "irrelevant" in the search for the elusive cure. What now matters is the survival of the human race. Paramount in this stanza is the realization that differences of whatever nature fuel conflict and death. When it concerns human beings, it does not matter the level of differences; all humans have to bond together in order to overcome their common threat. This is the way to go.

Concretising the steps to love, the poet-persona explains thus:

Yeah, let us be! That we might be -

Albeit this time our weapons shall remain sheathed
No needless bickering or wars -
You have taught us how irrelevant they are. (45)

The poet is already contemplating post Covid-19 reality. Envisioned in these lines is the vision of the new world. It is a world of peace and love where “weapons” of war “shall remain sheathed”. The second step is to avoid or put a stop to “needless bickering or wars”. The attitude of the poet-persona is summed up in the word, “needless”, which points to the unnecessary reasons humans fight one another. Going forward, therefore, the poet expects the entire human race to shun wars. The reason for this is that, as the poet-persona has said, wars are irrelevant to winning the battle against the Corona virus.

The poet then gives the weapon that can be employed to defeat the pandemic in the following lines: “Now we bid you farewell mother corona/ As our hearts close to your presence/ Thanks for showing us that only love conquers!” (45) The evidence from the poem above inexorably leads the poet-persona to conclude that “only love conquers” and that love has the power to conquer the pandemic. This should be understood against the backdrop of what it must take to overcome the challenges the virus has wreaked on humanity. These may be in terms of economic hardship, job loss, hunger, anxiety over boredom, lockdown and human survival. All these do not need medicine, but they need loving and caring hearts. Thus, in overcoming these challenges, it is only love that can conquer them all.

Also in the poem, “This Too Shall Pass”, Olaosebikan reiterates the power of love:

Our differences buried with our fallen heroes-
A new dawn beckons!
At the end, we all shall sing our victory song -
For none can defeat us when we unite in love. (48)

The poet persona appears optimistic about the love recipe being advocated in defeat of the challenges posed by the pandemic. The death of thousands and millions of people in the plague, paradoxically, is conceived as a sign of an end to human differences, as they are interred with the “fallen heroes”. This means, these deaths have put an end to whatever might breed war. The pandemic has ushered a new dawn to the world. The poet believes that as long as human beings walk and live in love, there can be no force strong enough to pull them apart. For this reason, victory is assured.

The poet extends the contemplation further, when love is considered as a unifying force:

Yeah, though the days be darkened now
But one thing I know one truth remains sure
No enemy shall prevail over the children of men
Not when love binds us! (48)

Notice the subtle comparison of love to light. The days are considered “darkened” by Covid-19, a metaphor for death and mourning in the land. The poet believes that the light of love will eventually erase every trace of darkness. Thus, love represents power, change and triumph over challenges. To comprehend the power of love, the poet draws attention to the fact that no enemy shall prevail over human beings who are already

bound by love. It is essential to add here that the poet contemplates the power of love to aid humanity in dealing with some of the challenges being faced at the moment. This means that the pandemic narratives that we hear in the poems are products of the poets' contemplations and the poems themselves function, therefore, as contemplative discourses.

The same optimism that characterised Ahmad and Olaosebikan's poems exists in Tochukwu's poem, "We'll Survive Covid-19". The optimism issues from the poet's belief in the power of love:

Unfortunately, sickness unites us,
Religious differences not a dictate right now,
Racism now averted,
The body now realizes:
What affects its parts, affects it as well,
Surely we'll survive. (55)

The paradoxical import of the opening line above is highly instructive. As unfortunate as the fact is, it remains true that humanity has to get together to combat a common enemy. In doing this, they become united. This statement is a product of deep introspective reasoning. The poet explains that humanity has learned that whatever affects a part, ultimately threatens the existence of the entire human race. When China was hit by the plague, it eventually spread to other countries. The pandemic became a source of global concern.

For this reason, the pandemic is a blessing in disguise:

Surely we'll survive,
Yes, we'll survive,
We'll survive to count our losses,
We'll survive and comeback stronger,
Covid-19, a curse, shall turn [a] blessing,
Uniting religion and races. (55)

If there is anything positive about the corona virus pandemic, it is in the fact that humanity will come out united, bridging the gap between religions and races. The repetition employed in this stanza highlights the need for human survival, which is constructed round the idea of unity of purpose and hearts. Thus, the power of love resides in the unity of humanity. The pandemic has united the world and has turned humanity into a global family, where love conquers and unifies them over their common challenges.

Human Resilience

This essay has, thus far, argued that pandemic narratives function as contemplative discourse in that the poets meditate on the frailty of human existence and mortality as well as the power of love and the global family of humanity. This section intends to extend the argument by articulating the poets' deliberation on human resilience. In this essay, the concept of human resilience is taken to cover the strategies adopted during the pandemic to overcome the challenges confronted by humanity. Hence, attention will be focused on how the poets depict various ways human beings

contrived to stay alive and beat the pandemic. The theme of human resilience engages the poetic thought of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo.

Adimora-Ezeigbo in "Brave Frontliner" extols the resilience of nurses fighting Covid-19. The poem begins thus:

You dare the plague's vicious and lethal attack
Rampage that throttles humanity to near extinction
You insist on providing the best service possible
Under the most harrowing circumstances. (190)

The effort of the nurses is to be appreciated against the challenges they confront. The plague is described as "Vicious and lethal" in its attack on the human race. Despite this real challenge, these nurses provide the best service possible. Their courageous service, like several others in the world, shows humanity's unwillingness to give up. This is the survival instinct. The poem evokes the image of all the health workers on the frontline, who leave their family members at home and return to them after many battles at different hospitals on daily basis, to the applauding cheers of all humanity. These nurses are the symbol of our fight.

In another poem, entitled "Escape from the Crocodile's Jaws", Adimora-Ezeigbo widens the scope of those who showed resilience in the face of the pandemic. This is conveyed in the form of the poet's personal friend who has recovered from Covid-19 infection:

Your resolve to stick it out amazes everyone
Except of course, your loving family,
For they know how determined you can be
To follow through a cause or mission. (19)

The speaker praises nurses all over the world who resolved to save lives, rather than prioritise their own safety. The poet, intrigued by their commitment and sacrifices, contemplates, by extension, the human survival instincts: this comes in the form of enduring all the inconveniences in order to win the battle.

Adimora-Ezeigbo observes further:

Undeterred by the tidal wave of death
You throw punches of care to stem its surge
That carries away the weak and the strong,
You wouldn't retreat though Covid-19 storm rages. (19)

The evocative power of the above language creates a vivid picture in the mind of the reader. The image of a wave establishes the great number of those who have lost their lives to the pandemic. Despite the horrendous effect of the wave sweeping lives away from the earth, the nurses remain "undeterred" as they battle, which the speaker expresses as the act of throwing "punches of care", to "stem" the surge of death. This metaphor of boxing conveys the resilience of these health workers in ensuring that lives are saved. The poet uses the word, "care", to disambiguate the metaphor of punches thus:

I sing the praise of one who survived
A dance of death with an uninvited guest,
My friend, the jaws of the flesh-eating crocodile,

In the image of dreaded Covid-19 from Wuhan,
 Came for you, snapping and snapping,
 You battled the jaws of despair and defeat,
 You trudged the lone and uncertain road to recovery. (21)

The poem is a eulogy, dedicated not to an individual's struggle for survival, but to all humanity for its resilience in the face of a devastating pandemic. Of special interest to the poet-persona are the battles for survival against despair associated with those who endured isolation and lockdown, as well as defeat in the hands of the dreaded Covid-19. According to the speaker, the road to recovery is a tortuous one through which the survivors "trudged", even when recovery was "uncertain", yet they went through this road "alone". The fighting spirit, the sense of unrelenting power and courage stood humanity out as the ambassador of resilience:

You endured being isolated from kith and kin,
 Surrounded by a jungle of infected compatriots
 For whom tomorrow seemed a distant century
 As they lay in a maze of unconscious consciousness
 You came through, your life intact though scotched. (21)

Part of the poet's contemplation revolves round humanity's resilience in enduring the boredom of being isolated. The psychological trauma of being cut from family and friends is more painful. These sets of human beings are said to be caught in a "jungle", a metaphor for lack of civilization and comfort. These patients endured all this to stay alive. There is the perplexing thought that their recovery can never be totally effected. This kind of depressing mental state has a way of discouraging those who are unfortunate enough to still survive in spite of the deaths. This reveals the resilience of humanity and it explains why the poet applauds them. The image of fire and burning associated with the word "scotched" metaphorically draws attention to the magnitude of the suffering, which many survivors had to endure to win the battle against corona virus. As it is with a contemplative discourse, the whole idea is to evoke several scenes which appear to bother the poet-persona. In this poem, the pandemic narratives, which seem to detail the various experiences of people, are products of the poet's reflection on the devastating power of the pandemic. The poem, therefore, is a contemplative discourse through which the poet conveys specific ideas, as in this context, human resilience.

Conclusion

Covid-19 has thrust upon Nigerian poets the task of contemplation, which finds vents in their poems. This essay establishes that the poems so far written on the heels of the pandemic are concerned with human responses to the corona virus. Established, therefore, in this essay are that the poets contemplate three vital issues. First, the preoccupation with the frailty of human existence and mortality. The poets selected for this study agree in their poems that the pandemic exposed the vulnerable nature of human beings and that they are mortal beings subject to die when infected. The next point is that the poets contemplate the power of love and make the case that every human being on earth is a member of the global family. The poets argue that, based on the above

recognition, it is important to show love and treat one another as members of one family and not as friends. Finally, the poets emphasise the theme of human resilience. This point underscores the various activities and strategies embarked upon by the people to surmount the challenges which Covid-19 has posed to humanity. The three subjects above confer on the poems the label, contemplative discourse. There is a link between the pandemic narratives, which paint the vivid pictures of the pandemic, and the processes involved in writing the poems. Since the poems are products of contemplation, the poems read like contemplative texts.

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